Policy Briefing:

Protecting Workers' Health in Cameroon

Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on February 25, 2023, focusing on the theme "The State of Occupational Medicine in Cameroon", presented by Dr. Ekiti E. Martin, former Manager of Occupational Health at SONARA and founder of The GREY Lab.

Context:

Occupational medicine in Cameroon is governed by a 1979 decree and overseen by the Ministry of Labour, with CNPS compensating work-related injuries. Services exist mainly in large private and parastatal companies. The government, the largest employer, has no systematic occupational health programme for its own workers, and informal workers such as farmers and moto-taxi drivers have no coverage at all.

Key Issues:

1. **Diseases overlooked:** Compensation and attention go to injuries, while chronic, musculoskeletal and mental health conditions, which make up most of the work-related burden, are rarely recognised.
2. **Unprotected public sector workers:** Government health workers are not routinely screened or vaccinated against hepatitis B before exposure, and exposures to blood are not followed up.
3. **No local data:** No Cameroonian studies appeared in the global reviews of work-related disease, so employers and policymakers lack evidence to act on.
4. **Overstretched company services:** Company doctors are absorbed by primary care for workers and families, leaving little time for prevention or research.
5. **Weak enforcement:** Accreditation and enforcement by the Ministry of Labour were described as weak, and risk analyses after injuries are not followed up.

Discussion Highlights:

- Drinking water and early working hours at the SOSUCAM plantation were linked to CKD prevalence of 3.4 percent, against 16.2 percent in smallholder cocoa farmers.
- Data on lost workdays persuaded SONARA to stock hepatitis B treatment on site.

- Participants stressed that pre-employment screening must lead to treatment, vaccination or redeployment, not exclusion.
- Decentralised recruitment of health staff offers an opening to introduce minimum pre-employment examinations.

Recommendations:

- **Protect health workers in public facilities:** MINSANTE and regional delegations should require hepatitis B screening and vaccination, and follow-up registers for blood exposures, for all health workers, starting with regional hospitals in the South West.
- **Set a minimum pre-employment examination:** The Ministry of Public Service and the Ministry of Decentralisation, with regional delegates, should define a job-matched pre-employment and exit examination for public workers, with treatment and redeployment instead of exclusion. A pilot in one council such as Limbe is the first step.
- **Recognise work-related disease:** The Ministry of Labour and CNPS should update criteria for compensating work-related diseases and check that post-injury risk analyses are implemented, involving occupational physicians.
- **Build mental health and ergonomics into workplaces:** Employers, through their hygiene and safety committees, should create mental health support and set ergonomic standards for office and home work.
- **Generate local evidence:** Companies and consultancies should track health-related productivity losses, and medical faculties should support student research on occupational health, beginning with the burnout study the town hall pledged to fund.
- **Reach informal workers:** MINSANTE, councils and NGOs should extend community screening and simple prevention, such as drinking water, ergonomic tools and heat-safe hours, to farmers and transport workers, building on models such as The GREY Lab.

Next Steps: The town hall committed to fund a student burnout study mentored by Dr. Ekiti, to consider inviting the Minister of Public Service or Labour, and to hold a future session on burnout.

Conclusion: Healthier workers are more productive workers. Cameroon has the legal framework and some strong company services, but the public sector and informal workers remain largely unprotected, and local data are missing. Simple, evidence-based measures and stronger enforcement could protect workers and the economy.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of February 25, 2023. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zVj-8sXu3s